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ABSTRACT

In her novel "Work," through the character of Rachel and her story, Louise May Alcott confronts many of the issues facing both "fallen" women and the social reformers of her day. Rachel, one of the sisterhood of the fallen, becomes an instrument of social reform after having been the victim of the sham respectability of her employer. Some early 19th Century U.S. prostitution reform efforts viewed prostitution as a voluntary vice, attempted to redress the problem with religious indoctrination, and failed. A more pragmatic approach was taken by women reformers in the 1830s who tended to see prostitutes as victims of male misconduct rather than as wanton temptresses. These reformers openly challenged the economic disparity between men and women that often led to women's fall, and often articulated feelings of identification between themselves and prostitutes. The characters in "Work" involved in Rachel's story can be seen as embodying the existing attitudes towards the reform of fallen women, and the story shows that simple human understanding can succeed where empty sermons have failed. The idea of sisterhood in "Work" creates a force capable of positive social reform. Alcott's application of this idea to the treatment of fallen women provides a positive alternative to the Magdalen Asylums of her day. She demonstrates, through the relationship of Christie and Rachel, her belief that women must help each other in order to become "a league of loving sisters" ready to share in God's work and plan for the future. (PRA)

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The "Proper Institutions": Social Reform and the Rachel Episode in Work

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The "Proper Institutions":

Social Reform and the Rachel Episode in Work

"I forgive you, Rachel, and I pity you; but I can't think of allowing you to stay. There are proper institutions for such as you, and I advise you to go to one and repent," states Mrs. King in Louisa May Alcott's novel Work (138) upon learning that the young seamstress has a "past." The "proper institutions" she refers to are the Magdalen Houses, first established in the United States in the 1830s during a time of growing concern for the reform and salvation of the increasing numbers of prostitutes and other fallen women. The publication of Alcott's novel in 1873 coincided with the second wave of prostitution reform that swept the nation following the Civil War. In Work, through the character of Rachel and her story, Alcott confronts many of the issues facing both the fallen woman and the social reformers of her day.

Alcott is not alone in examining the social repercussions generated by this sensitive issue. Many of her Victorian contemporaries including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins and Thomas Hardy explore the consequences of the sexual fall in greater detail in certain of their novels. This examination, asserts George Watt, allows the novelists "to highlight the intense and complex problems of Victorian women from all classes, expose the

sham respectability which personifies the patriarchy, and gives themselves the role of social reformer in the process" (7). Rachel, too, will become an instrument of social reform after having been the victim of the "sham respectability" of her employer. She tells Christie, the heroine of Work, "I gave all my strength to saving those who were going the way I went. I had no fear, no shame to overcome, for I was one of them" (161).

Rachel's statement, "I was one of them," does not necessarily mean that she was a prostitute, but one of the sisterhood of the fallen. Nicole Rafter notes that "'prostitution' was defined to encompass even minor deviations from middle-class standards of female propriety" (118). These standards did not include the growing numbers of women in the work-place for whom the "traditional definitions of virtue" (Rafter 160) grounded in the home did not apply.

The reform of prostitutes was then more of a moral than criminal issue, an issue for the community rather than the courts. Unfortunately, most communities' attempts at reform proved unsuccessful. One of the earliest reformers was the Empress Theadora, herself a former prostitute, during the Roman Empire. Her method involved building a special palace for the prostitutes and forbidding them any further contact with the outside world. Such drastic measures produced disasterous results: "It is recorded that many of the girls perished of sheer ennui, or escaped that lingering death by suicide" (Benjamin 108).

Fourteenth century Vienna saw its community establish special "Magdalen Homes" for repentant prostitutes (Bullough 115). These homes were eligible for city charter. The most famous, Soul House, chartered in 1384, was eventually closed after a mass "relapse" by its occupants. A similar case is recorded in England in 1758 at the Magdalen Hospital founded by court chaplain, Dr. William Dodd. Here, according to Hillary Evans, "The inmates were dressed in sober grey uniforms and set to work at sewing" (92). Domestic activity did not apparently provide a suitable incentive to reform and most of the "inmates" escaped and the project failed.

The early nineteenth century American reformers were either ignorant of or undeterred by the failures of their historical counterparts. Influenced by what Mark Connelly describes as "evangelical and perfectionist notions of social reform . . . organizations, such as the New York Magdalen Society, dedicated to the moral and social rehabilitation of prostitutes and the prevention of sexual lapses" (4) were founded. These organizations were fueled by what Ruth Rosen calls "the evangelical zeal of the Second Great Awakening" (7). During religious revivals occurring in the Northeast in the 1830s, "members pledged themselves to the task of purifying American society by exhorting obedience to the seventh commandment and exposing the extent of vice" (7).

One of those taking up the cause was a divinity student named John McDowall, the founder of the New York Magdalen

Society. This organization published its first report in 1832. In this report, reprinted in McDowall's Journal 2, 1834, "the Magdalen Society dramatically reported that at least ten thousand prostitutes blighted the city" (Rosen 7). Undoubtedly confident in the rightness of their cause, the society also "boldly exposed the names of gentlemen who had frequented New York's best brothels" (7). The backlash of some of these prominent patrons no doubt contributed to the disbanding of the society due to a lack of funding.

Prior to its disbanding, McDowall and his followers established a "Magdalen asylum" for the rehabilitation of prostitutes. Benjamin comments on the Society's methods:

> All day long the prostitutes were kept busy singing hymns, praying, and listening to sermons--a massive dosage of what we might now term brainwashing. But those unfortunate women, too, would have perished of sheer boredom had not most managed, by night, to slip out of windows and unguarded doors and engage in the practice of their profession. Even so, only four girls remained at the asylum for a full month, rehabilitation was claimed in only one case, and the experiment was terminated. (108-109)

McDowall's attempt at religious brainwashing rather than sincere rehabilitation may have resulted from his belief, shared by many men, that the "prostitutes' sufferings were "self inflicted . . . the necessary result of voluntary vice" (Rosen 8). It is no wonder Rachel exclaims:

> Your Magdalen Asylums are penitentiaries, not homes; I won't go to any of them. Your piety isn't worth much, for though you read in your Bible how the Lord treated a poor soul like me, yet when I stretch out my hand to you for help, not one of all you virtuous Christian women dare take it and keep me from a life that's worse than hell. (139)

These asylums were basically throwing religion at the problem, hoping that the Lord would somehow provide suitable alternative employment.

Dickens in his helping the establishment of a similar project, Urania College, in London, 1847 "doubted the advisability of excessive religious influence" (Payne 36) in the rehabilitation of prostitutes. From his own observations he knew "that the girls shrank with real fear from that sort of thing" (36). Dickens' advice was ignored, however, and Urania College soon closed without a single convert to its name.

A more pragmatic approach to prostitute reform was taken by the women reformers in the 1830s who "tended to see prostitutes as victims of male misconduct" (Rosen 8) rather than wanton temptresses. Their efforts appear to have been more successful, or at least longer lived. The successor to the New York Magdalen Society, the New York Female Moral Reform Society, established in 1834 was to become a national organization by 1839 with 445 auxiliaries (7). Through its

newspaper, the Advocate of Moral Reform, formerly owned by McDowall, the Society published

> the names of brothel customers and other licentious men, urging women to ostracize such men, siding with prostitutes in murder and assault cases, invading or standing outside brothels to drive customers away, urging women to supervise the sexual education of their sons, and lobbying to make seduction a criminal offense. (8)

The Society practiced their belief that "women had to take the lead in moral reform" (7) in returning the "lost sisterhood" to the fold. This view is in keeping with Alcott's stand in Work that women need "to know and help, love and educate one another" (442). Rosen notes that "in their publications, female reformers repeatedly challenged the socially upheld distinctions between madonnas and magdalens and declared their solidarity with all women" (8-9).

During the 1840s and 1850s, these reformers openly challenged the economic disparity between men and women that often led to women's fall. They sought higher wages, union rights and places in traditionally male occupations for women. "Many of the reformers," comments Rosen, "came to recognize the precariousness of their own social and economic position as women, and thus to articulate feelings of identification between themselves and prostitutes" (8).

While Alcott's heroine, Christie, only attempts
female employments, her defense of Rachel ackno
empathy: "Mrs. King, if you send her away, I mu
in; for if she does go back to the old life, th
will lie at our door and God will remember it a
the end" (139).

The reform movement was overshadowed by th
Following the war, however, came a new "'purity
the regeneration of American sexual morality" (
4-5). This second wave included those who viewe
prostitution as "necessary to accommodate men a
the purity of the home" (Rosen 9). These reform
known as "regulationists" as they sought to reg
register prostitutes in order to monitor their
assure their health (9). The regulationists' co
were the "social purity" advocates who sought t
abolition of prostitution as part of a call for
to reform its morals (9). This philosophy would
into the "progressive movement" of the first de
twentieth century which called for the creation
reformatories to house the fallen women (Rafter
sight, out of mind.

The characters in Work involved in Rachel
be seen embodying the several existing attitude
reform of the fallen woman. Mrs. King and Miss
the social purity advocates. They want nothing
Rachel in spite of her claim of being truly re

sister" (167).

Christie's unconditional acceptance of Rachel exemplifies Nicole's perception of the ideal reformer: she treats Rachel as a sister. Until David, Rachel's brother, tells his story, Christie is unaware of the circumstances of her fall, circumstances that could have easily been Christie's own as both characters initially leave home in order to work and gain personal and economic independence. Christie resists the temptation the Rachel succumbs to. David tells Christie, "For a time she did bravely, but life was too hard for her, pleasure too alluring, and when temptation came in the guise of love, she could not resist" (202). His recounting of his sister's rejection of his family shocks Christie, although it is typical of the male view: she is a disgrace to the family, the cause of its ruin, and beyond forgiveness. Only after years of working under the guidance of Mr. Power does David become a "brother of girls" (346). He embodies Power's definition of this phrase, "a man . . . who has a clean heart to love all women as his sisters, and strength and courage to fight for their protection" (346). His defense of sisterhood also makes him ideologically suitable for Christie.

The idea of sisterhood in Mary creates a force capable of positive social reform. Nicole's application of this idea to the treatment of fallen women provides a positive

[illegible] in the Baptist Union of New Italy, the denomination through the leadership of Christie and Rachel, her belief that women must help each other in order to become " a loving league of sisters" (442) ready to share in God's work and plan for the future.

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